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ABSTRACT

The results from several studies indicate clearly that students, alumni, and employers of college graduates are far more aware of the importance of a wide range of oral communication skills than are college faculties and administrations. The belief that students develop sufficient oral communication skills before coming to college, or that they can develop them adequately without substantial formal training at the college level, is belied by the results of these many studies of students, alumni, and employers. If the need to maintain balanced speech programs (emphasizing both skills and nonskills courses) is recognized and acted upon, the results of these studies can help in many ways. The results can be used to support the need to build and maintain strong programs of speech communication and strong oral communication components in the general education requirements. Advisers who are aware of the results can do a better job of directing students into elective courses in speech communication, courses that can serve the students' professional needs. Perhaps most important of all, the results should provide some guidance to speech communication teachers who are searching for ways to strengthen curricula and make their courses more useful to students. (RL)

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That Forgotten Basic Skill: Oral Communication

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Introduction

> In addition to students' deficiencies in reading, writing, analytical, and historical skills, it turns out that many of them have also lost their ability to speak well; and since this skill cannot easily be measured, its loss has gone unremarked. . . .
>
> Remarkably, the ill state of the spoken language is rarely mentioned in commentaries about the crisis in literacy and basic skills. . . .
>
> It is time that we recognize that the much vaunted "return to basics" must include attention to the spoken as well as the written language. Once we acknowledge the crisis in speech, we shall be able to talk about it and come up with a course of action to combat it. It will be none too soon.
>
> George M. Banner, Jr., Chairman, Board of Directors, American Association for the Advancement of the Humanities, "Accurate Spoken English is a Basic Skill, Too," Humanities Report, September 1979.

When Banner says that "the ill state of the spoken language is rarely mentioned in commentaries about the crisis in literacy and basic skills," he is correct only in part. The problem is rarely mentioned among academics, who apparently seldom listen to their students and so are unaware of their inarticulateness. Even when they are aware, academics are reluctant to insist on the kind of course work that can alleviate the problem. For example, one national survey of department heads in colleges and universities found that, although 88% claimed that

> Their students did not come to college with oral communication competency well developed, and although there was agreement that oral communication competency is important both during college and in careers after graduation, 62.9% of these chairpersons did not recommend Speech Communication courses to their students.[1]

On the other hand, as we shall demonstrate in this paper, students, former students, and employers are all aware of the problem and believe that colleges and universities should be doing something to alleviate it.

Alumni

College graduates consistently rank oral communication skills as extremely important and, at the same time, express dissatisfaction with the levels of such skills they have attained.

Alumni of the College of Liberal Arts at the University of Minnesota were recently given the opportunity to appraise their college education.[2] Among other things, they were asked "How important are the following objectives or benefits of a liberal arts education to you, and how satisfied are you with your attainments in each area?" The results are shown in Table 1.

One of the important findings was that, although written communication skills and oral communication skills were rated almost equally in importance, these college graduates were less satisfied with the level of skill they had achieved in speaking than in writing.

A panel study of college graduates who responded to questionnaires from the College Placement Council their freshman year and then four, ten, and thirteen years later (the last time in 1974-75) led to the conclusion not only that the major most people had in college is irrelevant for the jobs they hold, but also that they did not choose elective courses wisely, at least as far as employment needs are concerned.[3] In looking at the relationship between type of job held by these college graduates and the kinds of activities performed as part of those jobs, the authors of College Education on the Job found, not surprisingly, that communication was critical.

Communicating orally (speaking to groups and leading discussions) and communicating through writing (writing and editing) were among the activities which were important for almost all occupations of college graduates. Writing skills were more important than oral communication skills for office workers, mathematicians, scientists, and engineers; while oral communication skills were more important than writing skills for administrators, sales persons, allied health workers, educators, and social workers and counselors. The authors of the study conclude that students should be advised to take college courses that will give them the kinds of skills that are useful in a wide range of occupations. "Persons with skills in communication [speaking, writing], administration, program planning or budgeting, and marketing who can deal both with people and numbers should possess a generally useful career armory."

In 1972, alumni of the Liberal Arts and Sciences College of the University of Kansas were asked, among other things, what changes they would recommend in the general education requirements of the college.[4] As Table 2 shows, respondents were most positive toward the requirements in English and speech. For each of these, 34% of the respondents recommended an increase in the requirement while only 16% and 14% respectively recommended either a decrease or total elimination of speech and English. Interestingly, the longer respondents had been out of college the more they tended to value the speech and English requirements. This is probably related to the findings of the study, College Education and Employment. Those findings indicate that as one moves beyond an entry-level job, the specialized training received in college becomes less important while general interpersonal, communication, and business skills become more important. This is even

true of engineers. As one of the authors of the study noted, "the successful engineers 10 years later are not doing engineering, because they've been promoted into management."[5]

The Engineering College of Colorado State University in 1978 surveyed its graduates from the preceding eight years.[6] Among other things, respondents were asked which of the communication courses offered at the University were most important to the engineering curriculum. The courses ranked highest in importance were Public Speaking, Discussion, and Basic Technical Communication. These were ranked well above Composition Fundamentals, Introduction to Writing, Intermediate Writing, and the Senior Engineering Design Course. These results are especially interesting in light of the fact that the College of Engineering at Colorado State does not require any of the speech courses.

One of the largest studies of alumni in recent years that we have been able to locate was done in 1978 by a task force from the College of Business Administration of the University of Minnesota.[7] As Table 3 shows, when alumni, both undergraduate and MBAs, rated the importance of various relevant skills they placed skill in oral communication at the top. In addition, they rated many of the other goals of communication courses such as Interpersonal Communication and Group Communication as very important. These included interpersonal skills, decision-making and problem-solving, small group processes, and assertiveness and sensitivity.

Respondents in this Minnesota study not only rated the importance of various skills, they indicated how well their college programs had prepared them in each. This combination of questions produced some of the most interesting results of the study. Again, these can be seen in Table 3.

Note, for example, that although both oral communication and written communication skills were ranked almost equally high in importance, almost three times as many alumni thought that they had been very well prepared in written communications as in oral communication. Only 8% of the bachelor's degree holders and 14% of the MBA degree holders thought that college had prepared them well in oral communication. They gave their college programs even lower marks for their work on interpersonal skills and assertiveness and sensitivity training.

Students

The task force from the University of Minnesota Business School surveyed not only alumni, but students and employers also. The opinions of students were remarkably close to those of alumni on the importance of various skills and the degree to which their programs were honing those skills. These results are in Table 4. The major difference, not surprisingly, is that undergraduate students ranked job interviewing and resume preparation as much more important than alumni did, who presumably already had jobs. Students, like the alumni, perceived that their academic programs were not preparing them very well in the various oral communication skills, despite their importance.

A different sort of study was done in 1977 by the University Counseling and Placement Service of the University of Pittsburgh.[8] The purpose of this study was to assess the counseling needs of students. The authors report that they were most surprised at the results obtained when students were asked to indicate for which of a long list of potential "personal concerns" they needed help. "The most prevalent personal concern of students at the University of Pittsburgh is public speaking anxiety. It also ranked first

in mentions by each sub-group of students [undergraduates and graduates, males and females, blacks and whites, liberal arts students, general studies students, education students, and engineering students], suggesting a pervasive educational problem of considerable significance." The percentage of the total group of students citing each personal need can be seen in Table 5.

As Table 5 shows, general communication problems were also cited often as a personal need, along with more specific problems related to oral communication training, such as assertiveness and shyness.

The director of the University of Pittsburgh Counseling Center, one of the authors of the study, reports that he was taken aback that the survey showed students so concerned about their public-speaking anxiety. He termed it a "hidden problem" at the University, and explained why:

> Students with serious speech anxieties are unlikely to sign up for speech courses and they probably avoid, whenever possible, any course likely to require discussion or student presentations. . . . It is also likely to inhibit career options.
>
> Ironically, in this terrible job market there is evidence that students who write and speak well don't have much of a problem. . . . Despite that, students are motivated by fear to avoid acquiring these skills. Instead of getting help with a difficulty, they tend to avoid it, and we penalize them horribly for their problem.[9]

Employers

As we indicated earlier, the Business School task force at the University of Minnesota surveyed employers as well as students and alumni about the training needs of graduates. Both corporate recruiters and chief executive

officers of corporations were asked, among other things, "What major deficiencies do you see in today's business administration college graduates?" The responses to this open-ended question can be seen in Table 6. Skill at communication was one of the two deficiencies cited most often by both groups of respondents.

When these recruiters and chief executive officers were asked, "What special training, skills, or areas of specialization do you think might be especially beneficial to business administration college graduates in the future?" training in communication skills topped both their lists, with "people skills" (interpersonal communication) and "organizational dynamics" also mentioned by a significant number. These results are shown in Table 7.

Business and industrial leaders in the Los Angeles area were surveyed in 1975 to discover the deficiencies which they perceived in recent college graduates who had applied for positions with them.[10] Results indicated that recent graduates have the greatest problem with interpersonal oral communication competencies. The ability to write letters and memoranda as well as to communicate orally were considered greater problems for college graduates than their mathematical ability, administrative potential, initiative and self confidence, or their ability to understand and follow instructions well.

A professor of Business Education at Brigham Young University recently studied the activities of the 282 members of the Academy of Certified Administrative Managers to discover the skills they thought were most critical to managerial competence.[11] Table 8 shows the top 20 skills (out of 86 that were discovered) and the rankings given to them by these managers. As the Table shows, various communication skills dominate the list.

A similar sort of study was done with public health nutritionists. The Delphi Technique was used to discover the most critical competencies for

professionals working in the field.[12] A national sample of these professionals ranked the ability to "communicate clearly--oral and written" at the top of a list of 109 competencies. The top 17 of these are shown in Table 9. Note that four of these 17 (1, 3, 7, and 15) are competencies nurtured in various speech communication courses.

The American Chemical Society, at its education conference in 1975, urged chemistry departments to see that their students received more formal training in oral and graphic communication skills. Since 1978, the ACS has asked teams accrediting chemistry departments to evaluate the communication skills training offered to students.[13]

In a study of 160 Sunday newspapers, nearly 6,300 help wanted advertisements were found which specifically asked for applicants with communication skills. Verbal (oral) communication and selling were the two most frequently mentioned ones, followed by written communication, counseling, recruiting, interviewing, and supervisory skills.[14]

Gulezian surveyed 154 employers who recruit on college campuses to see the kinds of academic preparation these recruiters look for in non-business majors.[15] The three most strongly endorsed areas were accounting, oral and written business communication, and personnel management and human behavior in organizations. The percentage of employers recommending preparation in each area of study is shown in Table 10.

Hagge-Greenberg surveyed a similar group of employers, asking them to evaluate a list of skills and qualities which they might consider important when hiring a college graduate.[16] She then contrasted those who hired liberal arts graduates with those who do not. Oral communication skills topped the list in importance for both groups, as Table 11 shows. Other skills stressed by speech communication departments, such as interpersonal skills, were also ranked high by both groups.

Corson and Paul studied over 5,000 people holding key posts in the federal service and, from that study, concluded that "the professional's activities require that they be capable of communicating their knowledge effectively and defending it persuasively both inside and outside the agency." They also stressed that the professional's success depends on the ability to translate complex ideas into understandable terms.[17]

The latest issue of The Endicott Report: Trends in the Employment of College and University Graduates in Business and Industry 1980 provides data on the reasons employers did not offer positions to those college graduates whom they turned down.[18] These responses by the hiring officers of 170 well-known business and industrial concerns were evoked by this question: "What are the most common reasons for NOT offering a job? In other words, what negative factors most often lead to rejection?" The reason cited most often was "Inability to communicate" or "poor communication skills." This reason was given by 65 percent of the respondents, an amazingly high level of consistency for an open-ended question.

Another group concerned with the attributes or skills which increase the likelihood of employment are the counselors in employment agencies. Dubin, Alderman, and Marlow asked these counselors to indicate the competencies that are important to getting a job.[19] There were six skills that these respondents indicated were either "quite important" or "extremely important." They were: "listening, problem solving, decision making, motivation, questioning techniques, and speaking competence."

Discussion and Conclusions

These results indicate clearly that students, alumni, and employers of college graduates are far more aware of the importance of a wide range

of oral communication skills than college faculties and administrations are, at least if the requirements for degrees and advice given to most college students is any indication. The belief that students develop sufficient oral communication skills before coming to college, or that they can develop them adequately without substantial formal training at the college level, is belied by the results of these many studies of students, alumni, and employers.

These results have an especially high degree of credibility because almost all of the studies from which they come, as far as we can determine, were conducted by persons with no vested interest in the field of speech communication. They were conducted instead by persons concerned with improving undergraduate instruction in our college and universities, with helping more students get jobs after graduation, or with insuring a supply of able professional employees in their companies.

The strong case for the need for more and better speech communication training for college students has profound implications for departments of communication. One of the most important of these implications is easily overlooked in these days of scrambling for students. This is the fact that there is potential harm, as well as potential benefit, to our departments in the increasing recognition of the importance of speech communication training for all college students. As such recognition grows, pressures will mount to offer more and more "practical" courses. Even with a modest increase in faculty size which may accompany these pressures, the tenuous balance in most of our departments between skills and non-skills courses is threatened. We must recognize, and help administrators to recognize, that the quality of our skills courses is dependent in good part on the constant infusion of intellectual substance and excitement that can only

come from a lively scholarly enterprise that is integrated with that more practical enterprise. The department that is forced or permits itself to become simply a service unit is doomed.

If that need to maintain balanced departments is recognized and acted upon, the results of these studies can help us in many ways. They should be useful in convincing college and university administrators of the need to build and maintain strong programs of speech communication, and strong oral communication components in the general education requirements. Sharing the knowledge of these results with advisers throughout the college or university should help them to do a better job of directing students into elective courses in speech communication that can serve some of their professional needs. And, perhaps most important, these results should provide some guidance to those of us in speech communication who are searching for ways to strengthen our curricula and to make our courses more useful to students.

Footnotes

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3. Ann Stouffer Bisconti and Lewis C. Solmon, College Education on the Job--The Graduates' Viewpoint (Bethlehem, Pa: The College Placement Council Foundation, 1976), p. 43.
4. Jack Landgrebe and Howard Baumgartel, "Results of the Graduation Requirement Questionnaire for College of Liberal Arts and Sciences Alumni," Lawrence: College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, University of Kansas. (Typescript.)
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9. "Surveys Reveal Students' Concern Over Jobs, Public-Speaking Anxiety," Pitt News, May 1978, p. 4.

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14. Virginia Eman, Donald Enhold, Paul Fritz, and Judith Heck, "Surveying the Communication Competencies of Various Locations in Business and Industry," paper presented at Speech Communication Association Convention, Minneapolis, 1978. Reported in Vincent S. DiSalvo and Jeffrey K. Lukehart, "Identifying and Teaching Skills for the Organization Communicator: A Strategic Approach for Competency Development," paper presented to the American Business Communication Association Convention, Atlanta, Georgia, December 1978. (Dittoed.)

15. Allen K. Gulezian, "Does the Non-Business Major's Background Matter? Employers Say Yes!" Journal of College Placement, 39 (1978), 67-68.

16. Lanna Hagge-Greenberg, "Report on the Liberal Arts Employers Survey: Opportunities for the Liberal Arts Graduate," n.p.: Midwest College Placement Association, August 1979. (Multilith.)

17. John J. Corson and R. Shale Paul, Men Near the Top (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1977). The study was done under the auspices of the Committee for Economic Development.

18. Frank S. Endicott, The Endicott Report: Trends in the Employment of College and University Graduates in Business and Industry 1980 (Evanston, IL: Placement Center, Northwestern University, 1979).

19. Samuel S. Dubin, Everett Alderman, and H. Leroy Marlow, Managerial and Supervisory Educational Needs of Business and Industry in Pennsylvania (University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 1967).

Table 1

Importance and Satisfaction
of Liberal Arts Objectives and Benefits

Liberal Arts Objectives and Benefits	% indicating importance	% indicating satisfaction
Ability to think clearly	93.2	66.1
Written communication skills	87.6	57.5
Oral communication skills	82.6	42.9
Self understanding	80.1	58.4
Understanding, concern for others	75.8	59.3
Career preparation	72.3	28.4
Knowledge in a specific discipline	68.9	42.9
Social interaction skills	67.7	49.4
Understanding, appreciation of art, humanities	64.6	44.5
Understanding of social systems, political processes	61.2	41.9
Development of moral values	45.0	41.0
Understanding of science	41.7	28.6

Table 2

Alumni Recommendations on General Education Requirements

University of Kansas

	Increase	No change	Decrease	Eliminate
Speech	34	50	5	11
English	34	52	13	1
Mathematics	16	62	16	6
Laboratory Science	18	69	8	5
Foreign Language	13	47	25	15

Table 3

Importance of Various Skills and College Preparation
in Them
Alumni Responses

Skill Areas	Percent Responding "Very Important"		Percent Responding "Very Well Prepared"	
	Bachelor's degree	MBA	Bachelor's degree	MBA
Oral Communication	92	95	8	14
Written Communication	86	94	22	43
Decision-Making & Problem-Solving	82	86	26	45
Time Management	60	56	6	4
Interpersonal Skills	44	66	6	8
Business Strategy	44	56	8	29
Job Interviewing & Resume Preparation	31	19	4	3
Assertiveness & Sensitivity Training	45	32	4	3
Computer Usage	35	27	10	15
Small Group or Team Processes	36	44	17	34
Organizational Politics	27	35	1	3

Table 4

Importance of Various Skills and College Preparation in Them
Student Responses

Skill Areas	Percent Responding "Very Important"		Percent Responding "Very Well Prepared"	
	Under-graduate	MBA	Under-graduate	MFA
Oral Communication	87	92	8	15
Written Communication	87	90	23	34
Decision-Making & Problem-Solving	88	87	33	35
Time Management	46	49	11	8
Interpersonal Skills	57	Not Asked	5	Not Asked
Business Strategy	54	Not Asked	10	Not Asked
Job Interviewing & Resume Preparation	60	28	7	3
Assertiveness & Sensitivity Training	45	32	4	3
Computer Usage	36	28	10	15
Small Group or Team Processes	34	46	21	23
Organizational Politics	24	29	2	10

Table 5

Personal Problems for Which Students
Perceive They Need Help

Total Students (N=785)

Problem	Percent Citing
Public speaking anxiety	32.2
Fear of failure	23.7
Greater life purpose	22.0
Relations with faculty	19.4
Depression	19.0
Communication problems	18.0
Loneliness	17.6
Lack of self-esteem	15.8
Assertiveness	15.7
Establish meaningful relations	14.8
Shy, inhibited	14.4
Conflict with values, religion	14.4
Expressing appropriate emotions	12.7
Concern with heterosexual relations	11.5
Sexual concerns	10.3
Fearful of change	8.3
Marital problems	7.6
Fear of broken relationships	7.1
Overly dependent	6.0
Suicidal feelings	3.9
Roommate conflicts	3.7
Trouble with parents	3.4
Dependence on alcohol	2.4
Concern with homosexual tendencies	1.5
Concern with homosexual relationships	0.9
Dependence on drugs	0.8

Table 6

Kinds of Deficiencies Chief Executive Officers and Corporate Recruiters See Most Often in Business School Graduates

Deficiencies Cited	Percent of CEOs Mentioning it	Percent of Corporate Recruiters Mentioning It
1. exposure to practical business, as opposed to an academic orientation	31	40
2. communication skills	31	34
3. expectations (unrealistic)	22	12
4. self-discipline, commitment, patience, maturity	13	2

Table 7

Kinds of Training Chief Executive Officers and Corporate Recruiters Believe Would Help Business School Graduates

Training Suggested	Percent of CEOs Mentioning It	Percent of Corporate Recruiters Mentioning It
1. communication skills	31	36
2. internships, job experience	26	20
3. general management and problem-solving skills, organizational dynamics	20	20
4. EDP and computer skills	14	25
5. people skills	19	12
6. functional areas: Finance, Marketing, Accounting, Business Law, Industrial Relations, Economics	5	20

Table 8

The Twenty Most Critical Managerial Competencies

Importance Rating	Survey Rank	Competency
Super Critical	1	Listen actively
	2	Give clear, effective instructions
	3	Accept your share of responsibility for problems
	4	Identify real problem
Highly Critical	5	Manage time, set priorities
	6	Give recognition for excellent performance
	7	Communicate decisions to employees
	8	Communicate effectively (orally)
	9	Shift priorities if necessary
	10	Explain work
	11	Obtain and provide feedback in two-way communication sessions
Critical	12	Write effectively
	13	Prepare action plan
	14	Define job qualifications
	15	Effectively implement organizational change
	16	Explain and use cost reduction methods
	17	Prepare and operate within a budget
	18	Develop written goals
	19	Justify new personnel and capital equipment
	20	Participate in seminars and read

Table 9

Scale Scores of Essential Entry
Level Competencies of Nutritionists

The "entry-level" nutritionist should have the ability to:	Mean Score (1 = totally unnecessary to 7 = essential) All Respondents (n = 363)
1. Communicate clearly--oral and written	6.30
2. Perform direct dietary counseling	5.91
3. Be empathetic, sensitive to patients/ clients' needs	5.90
4. Provide nutritional care services in community health programs	5.88
5. Correctly interpret scientific data	5.84
6. Carry out planning function of programs	5.82
7. Communicate well in teaching-learning settings	5.81
8. Prepare educational materials/programs	5.78
9. Perform nutritional screening procedures	5.59
10. Do in-service education programs	5.55
11. Supervise/direct paraprofessionals	5.03
12. Be an active nutrition advocate in the legislative process	5.00
13. Participate in long-range planning efforts	4.90
14. Manage food service delivery systems	4.88
15. Communicate in public/mass media	4.65
16. Administer/manage programs, staff	4.48
17. Be a consumer advocate regarding food and nutrition	4.08

Table 10

Recommended Areas of Preparation by College Recruiters

Study Areas	% of Respondents
Accounting	81
Oral and Written Business Communication	77
Personnel Management and Human Behavior in Organizations	67
Finance	55
Data Processing	54
Marketing	50
Statistics/Quantitative Methods	50
Economics	50
Business Internship	32
Business Law	31
Production/Operations Management	26
Business Ethics and Social Responsibility	24
Office Administration	13
Insurance	11
Other	14

Table 11

A comparison of the rank order of items rated a 4 (very important) by employers who hire liberal arts graduates and of the rank order of items rated a 4 by employers who do not hire liberal arts graduates.

Rank	Response Items	Employers who do hire liberal arts graduates
1	Verbal (oral) Communication Skills	86%
2	Responsible	83%
3	Interpersonal Skills	74%
4	Initiative	73%
5	Decision Making	66%
6	Self-Discipline	64%
7	Self-Confidence	62%
8	Problem Solving	58%
9	Written Communication Skills	58%
10	Leadership	54%
11	High Energy Level	53%
12	Working Under Pressure	44%
13	Meeting the Public	43%
14	Organizational Skills	42%
15	Selling/Promoting Skills	38%
16	Appearance	30%
17	Math Skills	20%
18	Research Skills	8%

Rank	Response Items	Employers who do not hire liberal arts graduates
1	Verbal (oral) Communication Skills	78%
2	Initiative	76%
3	Problem Solving	75%
4	Responsible	74%
5	Self-Discipline	67%
6	Interpersonal Skills	62%
7	Written Communication Skills	60%
8	Decision Making	56%
9	Self-Confidence	55%
10	High Energy Level	53%
11	Leadership	47%
12	Organizational Skills	43%
13	Math Skills	43%
14	Working Under Pressure	38%
15	Appearance	31%
16	Research Skills	27%
17	Meeting the Public	24%
18	Selling/Promoting Skills	20%